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An African Shrub that Got Him off Heroin and Cocaine

by **Andrew Maykuth**

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It's from an African shrub. Howard Lotsof says it got him off heroin and cocaine.

To help battle addiction, he advocates the use of a drug

NEW YORK - Howard Lotsof was a 19-year old college dropout hungering for a new drug adventure in 1962 when somebody gave him a hallucinogen called ibogaine.

He sampled the drug, derived from the root of an African shrub, and experienced strange, colorful three-dimensional visualizations that kept him awake for more than a day.

In a sense, the trip has lasted for 30 years.

For what Lotsof said he discovered in 1962 is a drug that treats addiction. He said that ibogaine erased his dependency on heroin and cocaine without the agony of withdrawal-- a claim endorsed by other addicts who have tried it.

Lotsof has become the guru of a small band of evangelists, who speak of the drug almost reverentially. They accompany addicts to the Netherlands for legal, experimental treatment. Lotsof says the drug's effect "is like going through 10 years of psychoanalysis in three days."

Scientists regard the claims about ibogaine skeptically. But several studies have shown that Lotsof may be right.

"I decided to pursue a preliminary study as a lark, and it turned out it has some interesting effects," said Stanley D. Glick, chairman of the department of pharmacology and toxicology at Albany Medical Center.

"I think it merits further attention," said Patricia A. Broderick, a pharmacologist at the City University of New York Medical School, whose studies indicated that ibogaine inhibited the pleasurable effects of cocaine in laboratory rats.

The preliminary studies helped convince the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) to add ibogaine to its list of about two dozen drugs that merit research for addiction therapy. This year, NIDA is funding 10 studies to explore ibogaine's potential.

"This drug at first I found a little hokey," said James W. Cornish, director of pharmacotherapy at University of Pennsylvania's Treatment Research Center. "But the fact that NIDA is doing a study is very important."

The medical community's interest has given a measure of legitimacy to a compound that the Drug Enforcement Administration lists as a dangerous controlled substance, although there is no record of ibogaine addiction.

"I don't like to take it," said Lotsof, who formed a small company that operates out of his Staten Island home, which has obtained the patents to use ibogaine in addiction treatment.

"Ibogaine kind of knocks you on your butt, which is good because you can't go out and get drugs," said Dana Beal, a former Yippie and smoke-in organizer, who has become the drug's leading promoter. "By the time the ibogaine wears off, you don't have any craving."

Getting mainstream medical laboratories to look at ibogaine is largely the work of Lotsof and his disciples in New York's counterculture-- an alliance of aging hipsters, Lower East Side political activists and drug-decriminalization advocates.

Lotsof's appearance is not outlandish. He has short, thinning gray hair and a trimmed mustache and wears conventional clothing. He speaks in humorless, measured, hushed tones. He acknowledges he has a history of drug abuse. He spent 18 months in jail in 1966 for conspiracy to sell LSD.

In the early 1980's, after he was disabled with a back injury from his job as a film producer, Lotsof harkened back to his experience with ibogaine and decided to promote it as a treatment for addicts who were unable to cope with the debilitation of withdrawal.

Lotsof learned that ibogaine is derived from the iboga shrub, native to West Africa. Natives use it as a stimulant to keep hunters awake, and members of a religious sect in Gabon consume it in initiation rites, allowing them to speak with their ancestors.

Ibogaine had received little notice in the West, except for Hunter S. Thompson, the writer and noted drug sampler, who commented satirically that the statements of some candidates in 1972 presidential campaign were probably caused by ibogaine hallucinations.

Some pharmaceutical companies studied ibogaine over the years as a heart treatment or as a psychiatric medication, but they developed no drugs and their patents expired in the 1960s.

Lotsof got his friends to invest-- he says that his company, NDA International, has spent about \$1 million-- and persuaded a few pharmacologists to study ibogaine's effect on addiction.

While researchers are interested in ibogaine's apparent ability to inhibit drug dependency and are leery of its hallucinogenic properties, Lotsof and his followers argue that the drug's psychoactive nature is an essential part of its healing power. The "visions"-- Lotsof denies they are hallucinations-- help addicts deal with the underlying behavioral problems that cause their addiction.

"If people don't see anything, you're interrupting the therapy," said Bob Sisko, 46, a New York activist who kicked heroin with ibogaine and has helped promote its legalization. "Forget about that."

But the descriptions of ibogaine's hallucinatory effect hardly appear to conform with conventional pharmacology's preference for predictable results.

In a recent presentation to the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power-- ACT UP is interested in treating drug addiction because of its relation to the spread of AIDS-- Lotsof described a two-day treatment of ibogaine as a kind of high speed home movie.

"You are literally speeding through your life's decision-making history," he said. "Whoa! I did that and there were four other things I could have done. Zap. Next situation."

In an interview, Lotsof was more restrained in his description. He said that the release of memories is followed by "a period of intellectual evaluation," followed by "residual stimulation" and then sleep.

But not everybody gets the this-is-your-life treatment that Lotsof describes.

Carol-- not her real name-- is a 39 year old HIV-positive real estate saleswoman who has been addicted to heroin and methadone for 25 years. She recently paid about \$5,000-- the amount she would spend in a month on heroin-- to travel to Amsterdam, Netherlands, with Lotsof to undergo a medically supervised ibogaine treatment.

"It's like seeing a movie on your eyelids," said Carol, a plump woman who wore a black jumpsuit with an abundance of zippers. She said the visions-- which appeared only when her eyes were closed-- were mostly unfamiliar faces of medieval, mythological characters.

"If I would concentrate too long on one they would get ugly and I would get scared," she said.

But Carol said she saw no visions from her own life.

"I did have one vision that stuck with me," she said. "That was my brain, like a hand holding my brain, and this deep brown liquid dripping in thick oozy drops out of it. I felt in myself that my brain was soaked with ibogaine."

Carol said the 22 hours of visions were unpleasant-- she vomited frequently and her legs were so wobbly she could not stand. For days afterward, she said, she had no appetite and suffered from hand tremors and sleep disruption.

But Carol said that as uncomfortable as the experience was, it was mild compared to her previous attempts at drug withdrawal, during which she was overcome with pain, weepy eyes and discomfort for weeks.

"There was no sweating, no sniffing, no diarrhea, no cramps," she said. She has not taken any narcotics since the treatment in early April.

"This is like an amazing miracle."

Lotsof said that he and other ibogaine advocates have taken about 30 addicts to Amsterdam for treatment in recent years and few of them suffered withdrawal.

Lotsof has refused to make the drug available to desperate addicts in the United States because possession of ibogaine is illegal. "If we want to get this to the market, we have to do it properly," he said.

That is not entirely true.

"The people advocating ibogaine make it sound like the fact that NIDA is looking at, that's a validation that the drug works," said Charles Grudzinskas, director of medications development for NIDA. He said it could be years-- if ever-- before NIDA develops a useful drug from ibogaine.

"These claims are made about almost every drug," said Ronald Siegel, a UCLA psychopharmacologist. "Cocaine was once promoted as a cure for morphine. Morphine was promoted as a cure for cocaine. Psychedelics, including ibogaine and LSD, were all promoted as psychotherapeutic cures for all kinds of ailments, including drug addictions."

Undeterred, Lotsof said physicians are envious that somebody outside the medical field devised a treatment.

"If you're the person at the cutting edge," he said, "there's very little training to be obtained."

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